

PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

THE ARISTOTLE IN THOMAS AQUINAS

By

Paul Sunday OMOYEFA, Ph.D.
Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Humanities
National University of Lesotho
Roma, Lesotho. Southern Africa.

Abstract

It is a commonly held view that the philosophical system of St. Thomas Aquinas is nothing but a christianized philosophical worldviews of Aristotle. Aristotle is regarded as having the deepest influence on the thinking of Aquinas. Corroborating this view, Martin writes: "In the first place, St. Thomas is an Aristotelian. His basic concepts and categories are those of Aristotle, and when they are developed beyond the point at which Aristotle left them, they are developed in an Aristotelian manner"¹. In essence, the influence of Aristotle on Aquinas cannot be denied. However, in what specific ways has Aristotle influenced Aquinas? How did Aquinas become acquainted with Aristotle? Does Aquinas have an independent mind of his own in his writings? These are the questions, which this piece finds appropriate answers to.

Introduction

Aristotelianism had become a full-blown movement in the thirteenth century before the advent of St. Thomas Aquinas. Many philosophers had been acquainted with his works. Many were already writing commentaries on them while others were busy translating them into different languages. The translated writings of the works undertaken by Aristotle himself were already in the circulation and they constituted the main sources from which others took their origin. This effort by Aristotle was far-reaching to the extent that by 1255 all the known works of

Aristotle were being studied in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Paris.

By sheer coincidence, scholasticism also reached the peak of its development in the thirteenth century. It was at this period that the complete writings of Aristotle became known. At the same time, the writings of Aristotle began to attract more interest around 1225/1226 when Aquinas was born. At this time “from Spain had come Syrian, Arabian and Latin translations of the writings of Aristotle, Latin translations of Arabian commentaries, and original Arabian works. A group of translators, including Johannes Hisparius, Dominicus Gundissalinus, Gerhard of Cremona, and Michael Scotus, at the court of Archbishop Raymond of Toledo were active in disseminating the works of Aristotle. Beside this, a school of translators in Sicily had rendered certain Greek writings of Aristotle into Latin”²

Aquinas’ Acquaintance with Aristotle

The arrival of Aquinas at the *studium generale* in Naples began his full acquaintance with the works of Aristotle. This studium was established by Frederick II in 1224 to rival the papal studium at Bologna in particular. This is in furtherance of the hostilities between the Pope and the emperor at that time.

In the foundation charter of 1224, Frederick II stated without mincing words that “the first function of the studium was to train shrewd and intelligent men for the imperial service”³. The studium was called *studium generale* because all branches of knowledge and culture were taught there. According to Weisheipl “while study of law was the predominant purpose of the new imperial studium, it did have a fully developed arts faculty, since all the seven liberal arts and philosophy were universally accepted as the foundation for all higher studies”⁴.

Aquinas went to Naples in 1239 to undergo a study in arts and philosophy. In fact, the course in arts which Aquinas took at the *studium generale* at Naples followed the usual pattern of medieval universities at that time. At the studium, Aquinas underwent a complete seven years training under Peter of Hibernia. Here, Aquinas was introduced to Aristotle’s scientific and metaphysical writings. Thomas Aquinas was so engrossed in his studies then that he studied all the seven Liberal arts at the studium with particular emphasis on logic. Added to this was his study of the natural philosophy of Aristotle. This, he did, even at a time when partisan students were forbidden to study Aristotle’s natural

philosophy and metaphysics. In fact, it was “during his years in Naples that Thomas grew to adolescence and maturity”⁵. So, it was Peter of Hibernia, whom himself, was an adherent of the growing Aristotelian movement that introduced Aquinas into Aristotle’s writings. That Aquinas was taught the natural philosophy of Aristotle at Naples was at the behest of Peter of Hibernia. It was him who gave the youthful Aquinas his first acquaintance with the writings of Aristotle. Peter of Hibernia was a lecturer in natural philosophy and formed part of an Aristotelian movement generally associated with the court of Frederick II. He was an early pioneering figure in the introduction of the works of the Arab interpreter of Aristotle, Averroes. Although his Aristotelianism was sparse, nonetheless its influence on St. Thomas Aquinas was not minimal.

While Aquinas’ acquaintance with the writings of Aristotle started during his study under Peter of Hibernia, his interest in the writings of Aristotle fully developed during his tutelage under St. Albert, the Great in Cologne after he had joined the Dominican Order. Even though one could not vouch for the actual year that Thomas Aquinas became the pupil of Albert the Great, one thing is certain the Aquinas studied a great deal under the tutelage of Albert the Great especially in Cologne where Albert presided over the first *studium generale* in Germany. It should be explained here that it was their desire to spread the gospel that made the Dominicans establish a *studium generale* – a Dominican school of Theology and Philosophy mainly for Dominicans but open to others, in Cologne, Germany in the year 1248. Albert the Great was to preside over the new studium. Consequently, Albert, accompanied by St. Thomas Aquinas left Paris for Cologne in the summer of 1248. While in Cologne, Aquinas studied with the older Dominicans for four years as he continued his lectures on the Sentences.

It was Albert the Great that laid the foundation for the recognition of Aristotelian writings as very important for Christian thought and culture. It was him that founded the movement of Christian Aristotelianism i.e. the way of viewing the works of Aristotle, a great metaphysician within the purview of Christian doctrines. This, he did through the collection of the works of Aristotle and by tucking them into the values of Christian thought. Also, it was Albert the Great that brought Aristotelianism to the Mendicant Order i.e. Order of Preachers. For his thorough understanding of Aristotle was never in doubt. This was evident in his commentary on the *sentences* and in his *summa de creaturis* which was composed in 1250 and by which he was recognized as an authority in philosophical matters at Paris. Albert the Great felt unperturbed and unmoved by the ecclesiastical prohibitions issued against the study of Aristotle. In fact, with his liberal mind, he undertook the onerous task of handing over to

the Christian middle ages, the complete works of Aristotle. In demonstration of this desire, he wrote books on natural sciences for his confreres to have a comprehensive knowledge of nature as well as an adequate understanding of Aristotle.

Albert the Great never failed to admit his heavy indebtedness to Aristotle, which covers areas like ethics, metaphysics, logic and the natural sciences. In all his references to Aristotle, he called him the philosopher. Albert the Great says: “In matters of faith and morals, St. Augustine is to be accepted rather than the philosopher. But if we are speaking of medicine, I place more confidence in Galen and Hippocrates; if we are dealing with the nature of things, I trust Aristotle more than any other scientist”⁶ Albert the Great learnt a lot from Aristotle but this did not make him a blind follower of Aristotle. Situations had arisen when Aristotle would make mistake or contradict himself. Albert the Great, in this case would not hesitate to reject such. Also, he complemented the views of Aristotle whenever he considered them to be insufficient. Example of this situation was when he supplemented on plants and animals with his own observation. This goes to show that the fact of Albert the Great being indebted to Aristotle, does not take away from him his originality.

Albert, who was called “ the Great” while alive, was an extraordinary man in every way. His contemporaries gave him the scholastic titles of *Doctor Universalis* and *Doctor Expertus*. One of his greatest achievements was his detailed exposition and presentation of the thought of Aristotle to the Latins. The influence of Albert the Great both on Aquinas and the middle Ages was captured in these words of Weisheipl: “While Albert cannot be credited with introducing Thomas to Aristotle, he certainly augmented Thomas knowledge and encouraged its growth. Albert’s writing lacks the clarity, brevity, and simplicity of Thomas’s, but he had a breath of scholarship and Germanic thoroughness that far surpassed his disciple’s. Albert’s knowledge is found to be the more remarkable when one considers that he came upon the new Aristotelian learning when he was already middle aged”⁷ Also, while commenting on Thomas Aquinas pupilage under Albert, the Great in Cologne, Jean-Pierre Torrel writes: “The stay in Cologne constituted a decisive phase in Thomas’s life. In all likelihood, this was the period of his priestly ordination, but we do not have any precise information on this question. We do know, however, that Saint Albert had a considerable influence on him. During these four years, between the ages of twenty-three and twenty-seven, Thomas was deeply impregnated with Albert’s thought; he continued the work for him already begun in Paris. He was putting in

order his notes from Albert's courses on Dionysius's divine names and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*"⁸.

Thomas Aquinas continued where his master, Albert the Great stopped with a lot of improvement. Right from the inception, Aquinas had accepted Aristotle's teaching on politics, ethics, natural philosophy, psychology, knowledge, being and science. Aquinas was the first person to incorporate the entire *Nicomachean Ethics* in the *secunda secundae* of the *summa Theologiae*. Also, in the *Summa Theologiae*, *Summa Contra Gentiles* and especially the *commentary on Aristotle*, Aquinas adopted Aristotle's view about the need of clear definitions of philosophical terms, of a priori analysis of being, of a clear statement of the problem and of the difficulties, for attaining a comprehensive knowledge of the subject matter.

Although Aquinas did not write commentaries on all the works of Aristotle yet he was acquainted with all of them. His knowledge and understanding of Aristotle's was very deep. Even though Aristotle's works were originally in Greek language, Aquinas based his studies on the Latin translation of the Greek texts. He had insisted on good translations hence his decision to order translations of Aristotle's works to be made for him. This order brought about the trusted Latin translation done for him by William of Moerbeke, his brother in religion. Aquinas had given himself a thorough and good study of Greek language. This he did to have adequate knowledge of Greek language as a way of ascertaining the correctness of certain expressions and terms. Whenever he seemed to have problem, he consulted other scholars. For example at one time or the other, he made use of the commentaries of Boethius, Alexander, Amonius and simplicius to throw more light on the thought of Aristotle. This has made Aquinas to possess an excellent knowledge of Aristotle's writings and was able to quote Aristotle with masterly ease and precision.

Aristotelian Influence on Thomas Aquinas

In the opinion and thinking of Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle was really the great philosopher of all times. Aristotelianism as a movement had been in existence before Thomas Aquinas was born. However, it was through him and his master, Albert the Great that it became popular. For the early mediaeval philosophers has taken time to study Aristotle's works. Though they expended great energy and time on this yet their understanding of the man and his works was quite limited and inadequate. This was so because they only knew Aristotle as a logician an nothing else. It is true that Aristotle's works

on logic was great but it was his works on metaphysics that elevated him to the higher pedestal that we found him up till today. So, Aristotle as a metaphysician is more appropriate than Aristotle's as a logician.

In fact, Aristotle's metaphysics has a deep influence on Aquinas to the extent that Christopher Martin has to say that Aquinas "is a metaphysician and he uses the concepts of Aristotle to systematize the unconscious metaphysics that we all share" Aquinas metaphysics, which he inherited from Aristotle, revolves round his concepts of change, potency and act as well as essence and existence. Aquinas explains change in terms of substance and accident. What is a substance? According to Aquinas, substance is that which constitutes the very nature of a thing while an accident is that which is not essential to the nature of a thing. Thus, there are two types of change basically: substantial and accidental changes. The substantial change is a change, which affect the very nature of a thing while accidental change does not affect the nature of a thing. In the same manner, every material being is composed of matter and form. Matter is the stuff with which it is made while form is that which makes it that particular kind of thing. Just as every material being is composed of matter and form is also is it made of up of potency and act. Potency is the natural capacity to become something else. Act is the end towards which potency is directed. Also, the essence of a being is that which makes a being what it is. It is the same as substance. However, the existence is that which makes the essence real or actual. In creatures, the essence is like potency, which the existence is like the act. Existence actualizes essence. On the other hand, existence is limited by essence i.e. essence determines existence.

Aquinas talks about dispositional property in his metaphysics. A dispositional property, by definition, is a potentiality directed towards a specific development or end. A disposition is a capacity to do something, which an object possesses. Like most Aristotelian terms, these are analogical uses of disposition, ranging from a concept (an acquired disposition to understand) to a sense faculty which as the eye (a natural disposition to see), to an innate property such as growth (a natural disposition to utilize food and transform energy). So, for Aquinas, a disposition is always a potentiality or a capacity to undertake or to develop towards a specific end. The "end" is called "act" which is the fulfilment or completion of the potency. Aristotelian teleology makes sense only in terms of the attainment of a *telos*, which is the end or goal of the dispositional property. Aquinas, following Aristotle, suggests that potency and act are the two fundamental categories of all being. In Aquinas ontology, the dispositional paradigm holds only for temporal essences. It would not hold for the divine or angelic essence. Neither God nor angels, so Aquinas thought, developed. Hence, dispositional properties are not applicable to these essences.

These dispositional properties of Aquinas are based on Aristotle Philosophical anthropology as developed in the *De Anima*. Each of these properties in the three generic sets¹⁰ - living, sensitive and rational, develops through a process towards a particular end or terminal point. Also, the doctrine of Potency and Act is Aristotle's original idea which Aquinas talked about. When Aquinas talks about four kinds of cause: Material, efficient, formal and final, he was greatly influenced by Aristotle. In fact, Aquinas used the example of a sculptor at work as Aristotle had done to explain this.

In essence, each particular end, which the potency actualizes, by definition, is good according to Aquinas. Consequently, there are as many goods as there are ends, and there are many ends as there are dispositional properties to be developed in an essence. So, there is no one content, which every instance of good has beyond its ontological status as an end. What Aristotle's calls *eudaimonia* is what Aquinas calls *beatitudo*"¹¹

The ultimate end in both Aristotle and Aquinas is referred to as "happiness" which is the common translation for *eudaimonia* and *beatitudo*. Happiness as the ultimate end, however, does have a distinct meaning in the account of each philosopher. In Aristotle, *eudemonia* means an activity of reason in accord with virtue. In discussing the moral virtues throughout most of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he brings our attention to the activities undertaken through the mean which help human agents function well as human beings,. However, in the tenth book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, he changes direction and stresses the role the intellectual activity of contemplation plays in bringing about the actualization of our rational disposition. Aquinas draws heavily upon the role of contemplation, which Aristotle developed in book 10 of his *Ethics*. Working within the structure of Christian theology, Aquinas argues that the ultimate end of human being is a contemplative awareness of God. Therefore, human happiness consists in an intellectual exercise directed towards an object, which transcends the ordinary experience of human beings.

Aquinas ethical theory is an inquiry based on Aristotle metaphysical theory of the human person. In essence, Aristotle ethical theory is dependent on his concept of practical reason. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle provided a sound and coherent account of what he called practical reason. He argues that practical reason is quite different from reason in theoretical or speculative form. For each of them has its own set objectives and principles - Aristotle's "good" as the end product of practical reason and "truth" as the end product of speculative reason. Aristotle also made a distinction between mode of argument for speculative reason and that of the practical reason.

Aquinas draws inspiration from this and makes use of it in his discussion of ethical naturalism. While commenting on Boethius' *De Trinitate*, Aquinas talks about practical and speculative reason thus: "A theoretical or speculative inquiry is distinguished from a practical inquiry in that the former is directed toward discovering truth claims considered in themselves. The latter, to the contrary, is directed towards the doing of something. Thus, the purpose of speculative inquiry is truth, while the purpose of practical inquiry is action, in the area of actions in our capacity to undertake. The goal of a speculative inquiry is not about determining means to ends i.e. Actions to be undertaken"¹² Aquinas re-emphasized the distinction between practical and speculative reason in his popular work *Summa Theologiae*. He writes: "As the speculative reason discusses the theory of things, so the practical reason debates the problems of actions"¹³. Here, Aquinas follows Aristotle to accept a paradigm of speculative and practical reason. To Aquinas, while practical reason performs what is to be done, speculative reason only have knowledge of what to be done, So, Aquinas natural law ethics is derivative from and dependent on Aristotle's eudaimonistic naturalism as spelled out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

On Nicomachean Ethics

Aquinas' theory of natural law has also draws inspiration from Aristotle. Aristotle made a clear-cut distinction between natural justices and the conventional or written law¹⁴. Even though the distinction had earlier been made by Antiphon, a Greek philosopher, Aristotle fails to explain in details the distinguishing features of the two. However, the influence can be clearly seen in Aquinas when he anchors his natural law theory on the metaphysical postulation of Aristotle. In fact, the texts in the *Summa Theologiae* are not independent in structure from Aquinas' treatment of Aristotle's moral theory in his *Commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics*. So, the two major works of Aquinas on Moral Theory i.e. *Summa Theologiae* and *Commentary on Nicomachean Ethics* are based on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aquinas made a wholesome study of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and incorporated it in the *Secunda Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*.

Also, Aquinas' theory of knowledge is that of Aristotle, rendered somewhat more explicit. According to Aristotle the mind is *tabula vasa*. External things impinge upon the senses, which present the individual object to the mind. This strips the object of all that is individual and accidental, and grasps the essence or real nature. For instance, we see Paul, and recognize in him manhood, the nature of a rational animal, man. The essence of the individual abstracted by the mind is in one less real than it is in the individual himself, for it only exists fully and in its own right in the individual. But in another sense, it is more real, for to Thomas Aquinas as to the neoplatonists, immaterial being, spirit and thought, is more real than physical, material being. It is higher mode of being and is logically prior to anything physical.

By reaching the essence we reach the formal cause of being, the expression in rational shape of the spiritual idea, which is ultimately its constitutive agency. From this, we could see the thorough and comprehensive acceptance of Aristotle by Aquinas.

Aquinas followed Aristotle in his view of space and time. Space, he held, cannot be abstracted from the existence of bodies. Aquinas did not accept the doctrine that space is infinite for this would have been contrary to Christian theology. Aquinas showed time to be depended on motion; and he made it clear that time, like space, is finite. Still, he was certain, the human concept of time differs from that of God in whom past, present and future are comprehended simultaneously. In fact, there are more than 2000 quotations from Aristotle in Aquinas' commentary on Peter Lombard's four books of the Sentences. The *Nicomachean Ethics* ranks first with some 800 citations; the metaphysics follows far behind with around 300; the physics and the *De Anima* account for about 250. It is this influence of Aristotle on Aquinas that makes McInerney to submit thus: "I hold that Thomas' commentaries on Aristotle are precisions aids for understanding the text of Aristotle ... The Apostle Subhomed within the commodious synthesis of Thomas is the historical Aristotle"¹⁵.

Conclusion

That Thomas Aquinas was very versed virtually all of Aristotle's works is not in dispute. He drew quotations freely and accurately from the writings of Aristotle. Aquinas' works, *De ente et essentia* and the *Commentary on the Sentences* are examples of this. His works, *Questions disputatae Questiones quodlibetales* as well as the popular *Summa Theologiae* are not left out. Aristotle is quoted severally and at times frequently by Thomas Aquinas in the above mentioned works of his. In fact, hardly do we see any of his notable works without drawing inspiration from Aristotelian thought. This goes to demonstrate the extent of Aquinas' indebtedness to Aristotle.

This heavy indebtedness of Aquinas to Aristotle has brought about some criticism against Aquinas as lacking in originality in his commentaries on Aristotle's writings. This criticism does not represent the true position of things. The first fundamental issue which these critics need to know is that Aquinas was not familiar with Aristotle's writings in their original Greek texts. Rather, he wrote all his commentaries based on the Latin translation of Aristotle's works; and as we all know, there is no way a translated work could be as perfect and accurate as the original work. So, if there is any defects noticeable in all his commentaries on Aristotle works. The fault was not his but the translator of Aristotle's original works from Greek to Latin.

This is so because Aquinas read these Latin translations comprehensively and thoroughly to the extent that they became part and parcel of him.

Aquinas was conversant with all the works of Aristotle and he made diligent use of them in all his commentaries on them. He was very objective in his commentaries. This is evident in his method of commenting on the works. Aquinas would first of all state in the most objective form, contents of Aristotle's works the way he was them. Thereafter, he would make a critical appraisal of them. In doing this, he would correct any wrong presentations made by Aristotle and at times reject completely any wrong conclusions arising therefrom. This is to confirm that Aquinas was not a mere or copy commentator on Aristotle's writing but by a person whose commentaries on the writings of Aristotle arose from his comprehensive, painstaking and excellent knowledge of Aristotle's works and then went for the good one done by William of Moerbeke. Aquinas' sufficient knowledge of Greek language helped him a lot to discern which of the many Latin translations of Aristotle's works was the best. So, Aquinas put a lot of energy, effort and time into the study of Aristotle's works before writing commentaries on them though we could not deny the fact that the earlier commentaries on Aristotle's works written by Boethius and the likes were of great help to him in fashioning out the peculiar way he went about his own commentaries.

Also, Aquinas was not a blind and unreasonable follower or disciple of Aristotle. Aquinas, without any doubt, was a core Aristotelian who believed so much in Aristotelian doctrines in all ramifications. He even went ahead to see to the expansions and spread of Aristotle's system. Aquinas was a man who would not support any of the Aristotelian doctrines without critical evaluation and rationality. Wherever, the conclusion of Aristotle on any issue was devoid of reason, Aquinas would not hesitate to infuse this to make it more rational, convincing and acceptable. To this end, while the main task before Albert the Great was to make Aristotle more intelligible to the Latins, that of Aquinas could be said to make Aristotle more rational to the world. No wonder, Aquinas was not in any form lacking in a critical attitude towards Aristotle and his works.

For on many issues he had criticized and opposed Aristotle. For example in the *Summa Theologiae* he rejected Aristotle's teaching about pure spirits¹⁶. Also, Aristotle's idea that the world is eternal and consequently his idea of motion, time and human race, did not receive warm reception from Thomas Aquinas. Although he himself believed in the eternity of the world but not the way Aristotle conceived of it. For example, he believed in the attainment of perfect and unstained happiness in the next life as opposed to the Aristotelian belief that his could be attained here on earth.

On the whole, the influence of Aristotle on the person, thought and writings of Thomas Aquinas could not be controverted by anybody. . In fact, scarcely can you mention Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century without mentioning Aristotle of the Ancient Greek era. Aquinas was Aristotle Christianized. For there is Aristotelian background in all his works and the important fact must be noted that it was Aristotle who introduced Aquinas to be detailed problems of philosophy.

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